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SUBJECT: IRAN: IRANIAN MARTIAL ARTS COACH CLAIMS MARTIAL ARTS CLUBS USED FOR POLITICAL REPRESSION, KILLINGS

REF: A) BAKU 575

Classified By: POL/ECON COUNSELOR ROB GARVERICK, REASON 1.4 (B and D)

Iranian Martial Arts Clubs Used for Political Repression

¶1. (C) Hooshang, a licensed martial arts coach and trainer from Tabriz currently visiting Baku (protect), told Baku Iran watcher that private martial arts clubs and their managers are under intense pressure to cooperate with Iranian intelligence and Revolutionary Guard organizations, both in training members and in working as "enforcers" in repression of protests and politically motivated killings. Hooshang, who provided originals of his Iranian coaching license and technical certificate as a First Grade Black Belt in Ninjutsu, claimed to have been deputy manager of a private Ninjutsu school in Tabriz since 2006. He claimed that his "sport" of Ninja combat training has a small but increasing following in Iran, and has with difficulty maintained its independence from control by organizations affiliated with the Revolutionary Guard and/or intelligence service. According to Hooshang, most other private martial arts organizations in Iran, including Tae Kwon Do and Jujitsu clubs, have already acceded this pressure.

¶2. (C) Hooshang observed that Iranian internal security forces are highly suspicious of these clubs as potential vehicles for organization and "combat" training of future protesters and regime opponents. Nonetheless, he asserted that their main motivation is seeking to control these clubs is less driven by such fears as by a desire to deploy their trained membership at will for "special tasks." According to Hooshang, these tasks range from providing martial arts training to Revolutionary Guard members and Basij, assistance in protest repression, intimidation, and crowd control, to political killings. He observed that use of these clubs and their members provides the security forces with "plausible deniability" for dirty undertakings, as well as trained fighters and potential trainers.

Alleged Contract Killings

¶3. (C) Hooshang said he personally knew one such martial arts master whom he said was used by the Intelligence service to murder at least six different individuals over the course of several months in the Tabriz area. Hooshang said that the victims included intellectuals and young "pro-democracy activists," adding that his assassin acquaintance was

ultimately "suicided" by the authorities (i.e., killed in what was subsequently labeled a suicide). Hooshang claimed that his club was raided and greatly restricted last Spring after he and the club manager refused to train Basij or lend them their facilities. He said that they also refused to mobilize their membership to assist in repressing local protesters commemorating the third anniversary of the anti-Azeri "cockroach cartoon" incident. Although he has stopped working at the school, he claimed to be under relentless pressure to cooperate, relating that recently his father has been summoned by the authorities several times and urged to "convince" his son.

¶4. (C) Hooshang left Tabriz in mid-July, and is currently waiting for action on a request for a visa to Japan, where he has martial arts contacts. (Note and Comment: A Tehran-based student recently echoed some of Hooshang's story, noting that his Tae Kwan Do class could only be held at night as during the daytime his instructors are "required to train the Revolutionary Guard." The use of martial arts clubs members as political enforcers/repressors existed under the Shah, and, according to sources, exists today in several neighboring countries, including the Republic of Azerbaijan. End Note and Comment).

Tabrizis "Pragmatic" on Post-Election Protests

¶5. (C) On the topic of Tabriz-area post-election protest activities, Hooshang said that almost everyone he knew voted for Moussavi, and was angered by the fabricated result. However, he claimed that there was considerable reluctance to

turn to the streets once serious repression began. He said that Tabriz residents are "very pragmatic"; while not afraid of protesting per se, they will only do so in favor of a tangible end result that they feel is clearly in their interest. He asserted that many Tabrizis saw the election and subsequent fallout as a power struggle within the Tehran regime which had little to do with them or their felt interests. "People see it as an issue for Tehranis," he said, and are "reluctant to risk their necks" unless/until they feel that real regional policy changes are achievable.

¶6. (C) He explained that "no matter who wins,(many Tabrizis) feel that there will be no change" in language, cultural, and government hiring policies that discriminate against Azeris. He depicted these as by far the most powerful regional political issues, outweighing desire for greater regional autonomy and other issues. While acknowledging that both Moussavi and Karroubi had made campaign statements endorsing liberalization of language policies, Hooshang said that these statements were perceived as lip service, and that "(de facto) Tehrani" Moussavi in particular was not regarded as credible on this issue, given his earlier attitudes on the issue when he was Prime Minister. Comment: Hooshang's remarks on the reasons for relative Tabrizi diffidence and focus on language issues echoes earlier comments made to Baku Iraq watcher by a former Azerbaijani Ambassador to Iran and an Iranian Azeri intellectual (ref a, item #5). It is interesting to hear similar points from a non-intellectual who claimed little interest in Azeri nationalism. End Comment.